

Action needed to find, test, treat millions unknowingly infected with viral hepatitis – UN health agency

Millions of people globally who have viral hepatitis are unaware or unable to receive treatment, the United Nations health agency said Friday, on the eve of World Hepatitis Day, raising the alarm to “find, test and treat the missing millions.”

Both worldwide and in the South-East Asia Region, less than one-in-10 infected people are estimated to know their status, while less than 10 per cent of those who do know are actually receiving treatment, according to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#).

“This lack of awareness and treatment leads to progressive liver damage and can cause [life-threatening](#) conditions, such as fibrosis and liver cancer, resulting in an estimated 410,000 deaths in the Region every year,” said Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia.

“It also allows viral hepatitis to spread: Region-wide, an estimated 40 million people live with chronic hepatitis B while an estimated 10 million live with chronic hepatitis C,” she added.

Pointing out that “urgent action is needed to find, test and treat the missing millions,” she highlighted the agency’s Regional Action Plan, which aims to expand the number of people aware of their status to 50 per cent, with at least 75 per cent of those diagnosed with the disease, receiving treatment by 2020.

Greater awareness among the public and high-risk groups is key to eliminating the viral hepatitis health threat by 2030.

She urged health authorities region-wide to send clear messages on the disease’s signs and symptoms, where they can get tested and seek treatment, and how infection can be prevented – such as through hepatitis B vaccinations, practicing safe sex and safe needle usage.

The Regional Director underscored the importance of health workers having better access to quality diagnostics and affordable, quality-assured testing kits.

For people diagnosed with hepatitis B or C, she said “access to effective and affordable treatment is vital.”

Every second person who injects drugs is living with hepatitis C –
Yury Fedotov, UNODC Executive Director

“While treatments have existed for hepatitis B for some time, Directly-acting antiviral drugs can now cure hepatitis C in up to 95 per cent of cases,” she said, noting that dramatic reduction in cost.

World Hepatitis Day

World Hepatitis Day marked on Saturday, is focussing on raising awareness of the global burden of viral hepatitis as a major health problem in need of an urgent international response.

Marking World Hepatitis Day, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)) called on people globally to take action to find the “missing millions,” including intravenous drug users and people in prison.

“Every second person who [injects drugs](#) is living with hepatitis C,” said Yury Fedotov, UNODC Executive Director, indicating that women in this category have a 38 per cent higher risk of contracting hepatitis C than men.

“The prevalence of hepatitis B infection among people who inject drugs is 7.5 per cent,” he added.

Due to contaminated equipment and unsafe injection of drugs, along with other risk factors such as unsafe tattooing and skin piercing, a 2016 global review indicated that, of the estimated 10.4 million people incarcerated worldwide, 15.1 per cent have hepatitis C and 4.8 per cent have chronic hepatitis B.

[UN chief welcomes new law giving extra autonomy to Muslims in Southern Philippines](#)

The [UN Secretary-General](#) on Friday welcomed a new law which grants extra autonomy to Muslim communities living in the Southern Philippines, describing it as a “landmark achievement on the road to lasting peace”.

Philippine President, Rodrigo Duterte, signed the new legislation, formally known as the Organic Law for Bangsamoro in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, on Thursday, raising hopes that years of separatist violence involving central Government troops and militants from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, can be brought to an end.

“The Secretary-General congratulates negotiators for the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Bicameral Conference Committee, the Bangsamoro Transition Commission and civil society groups for their efforts,” said the UN chief, [in a statement](#) issued by his Spokesperson,

Stéphane Dujarric.

According to news reports, the long-anticipated new autonomy came four years after the Government signed a peace deal with the separatist group, which dropped its bid for full independence, seeking instead a new deal over self-rule.

The Front began its uprising in 1978, marking a period of violent confrontation which left around 120,000 dead. The new expanded autonomous region in the south, will be led initially by a transitional authority, before being run by a new parliamentary body, say reports.

The statement from the UN chief said that the UN “will continue to support the Philippines in the implementation of the law, and to help build the capacity of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority as an effective conduit for peace, democratic governance, and human rights”.

[UN ‘committed to continue to support’ Pakistan’s Electoral Commission in wake of general election](#)

The [United Nations Secretary-General](#) has congratulated the people of Pakistan for “exercising their constitutional right to vote” on Wednesday, thereby reaffirming “their commitment to a democratic Pakistan.”

In [a statement](#) issued on Friday, on behalf of UN chief António Guterres, Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric commended Pakistan’s Electoral Commission “for the organization of the elections, noting positive initiatives related to training and efforts to enhance the inclusion of women, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups, as well as first-time voters, in the electoral process.”

He said the UN was committed to continue to support the Electoral Commission, as the smooth transfer of power remained in doubt on Friday, with latest news reports suggesting that a group of Pakistani political parties were rejecting the results, alleging vote rigging.

According to the official results released so far, the party headed by former international cricket star and national team captain, Imran Khan, is in the lead, but does not have sufficient seats to secure power without forming a coalition.

Mr. Dujarric said that the Secretary-General was looking forward to the formation of the new government and “wishes it success in providing the

people of Pakistan a stable, democratic, and prosperous future.”

The ‘used and abused’ children of Syria must learn what ‘peace’ really means, Security Council hears

More than 7,000 children have lost their lives or been maimed as a result of the brutal conflict in Syria, a senior United Nations official told the UN Security Council on Friday, stressing that they had been abused by the warring parties for far too long.

“It is time for the children of Syria to believe in their own future and to learn what peace means,” Virginia Gamba, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, told the Security Council.

“It is time for them to retake the childhood that was taken away from them. It is time for them to stop being victims and become game changers, in the restoration of normality in peace and justice. They have been used and abused by, in and for armed conflict, for far too long,” she added.

Ms. Gamba said that since the beginning of the Syria crisis in March 2011, the UN has verified the killing or maiming of more than 7,000 children in the conflict, now in its eighth year.

It is time for them to stop being victims and become game changers, in the restoration of normality in peace and justice – *Virginia Gamba*

“I must stress that this is the verified number alone, the unverified reports reflect numbers that go way beyond 20,000 child casualties”, she added.

She said they had suffered multiple appalling violations; in their homes, communities, schools, detention centres and displacement camps.

In 2005, the Security Council adopted a resolution that established a monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM) for six grave violations against children in armed conflict situations.

The six violations are: killing and maiming; recruitment or use as soldiers; sexual violence; abduction; attacks against schools or hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access.

Based on the resolution, the mechanism for the situation in Syria was

established in 2013.

“Every year since then, there has been a tremendous increase in all grave violations committed by all parties to the conflict”, she said.

Since the beginning of this year, the mechanism has verified more than 1,200 violations against children. More than 600 children have been killed or maimed; more than 180 were recruited and used; more than 60 schools have been attacked, while over 100 attacks on hospitals and medical facilities or personnel have been verified.

Ms. Gamba said most of these violations have occurred in the context of military surges by various parties in the areas of Afrin, Hama, Idlib, east Ghouta and Dara’a in the last six months.

“I am deeply disturbed by the stories of children born and raised throughout this conflict, children who have never seen peace in Syria”, she said. “They do not know the meaning of the word ‘peace’”.

Also briefing the Security Council was the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, who gave detailed updates on the humanitarian situation across the war-ravaged country.

“The appalling suffering this war has wrought on Syria’s children is truly unimaginable”, he said. “Yet, it is Syria’s children who are the future of the country. Ensuring that their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled must be at the centre of all of our efforts.”

Mr. Lowcock, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, said that since November 2017, the total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Aleppo and Idlib governates has increased by nearly 600,000, to a total of around 4.2 million.

He said that humanitarian needs remain high in eastern Ghouta, though there are also reports of markets beginning to function again and the return of other activities resembling normal daily life.

About 10,000 people from east Ghouta, mostly men between the ages of 15 and 65, are reported to remain in displacement sites across Rural Damascus. In the north east, returns to the liberated city of Raqqa – the former ISIL terrorist stronghold – have continued, despite risks due to high levels of explosive hazard contamination.

There are also very serious concerns about civilians trapped in areas held by ISIL, otherwise known as Da’esh, in the eastern part of Deir-ez-Zor governorate.

'Warehouses emptying' amid growing humanitarian needs in south-west Syria

More than 180,000 people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance in south-west Syria after weeks of escalating hostilities that have restricted aid access to the area, the UN said on Friday.

At a briefing in Geneva, Jens Laerke, spokesperson for the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), said that there were particular concerns for an estimated 55,000 civilians whose movements have been restricted by the extremist group Jaysh Khaled Bin Walid (JKBW).

"We are, of course, very concerned about this particular group's policy of restricting freedom of movement for civilians who are trying to flee the area and only a very limited number of civilians had been able to escape," Mr. Laerke told journalists.

The ISIL-linked terrorist affiliate's area of control, spans around 200-square kilometres of Syrian territory near the Jordanian border, OCHA said in a statement, noting that the development follows five weeks of territorial gains by Syrian Government forces against opposition armed groups in the south-western governorates of Dara'a, Quneitra and Sweida.

Several thousand people have nonetheless managed to seek safety from JKBW, but those who remain "are now subject to increasing hostilities", the OCHA official said, adding that between 21 and 23 July, "intense air strikes" were reported in the so-called Yarmouk Basin of Dara'a Province.

The targets included al-Shajra, Hayt, Tasil, Jellin, Sahm al-Golan, Adwan and Tal al-Jumou', OCHA said in a statement.

Reports suggest that at least 32 civilians were killed in these attacks, including 11 children and three women.

On Wednesday 25 July, a multiple suicide attack by ISIL in Sweida city also resulted in more than 240 casualties and injured at least 170 people.

United Nations [Secretary-General António Guterres strongly condemned](#) the incident, which came as UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura briefed the UN Security Council on efforts to end the more than seven-year Syrian war.

According to OCHA, one other area remains in opposition hands in south-west Syria, near the Golan Heights.

There, civilians face ongoing violence and cross-border humanitarian actors report that they only have limited supplies left.

"Our humanitarian partners who have operated across borders from Jordan are highly restricted," Laerke said. "In fact, it's over a month since there has

been a cross-border convoy from Jordan into the area.”

According to OCHA, the last cross-border convoy from neighbouring Jordan was dispatched on 25 June, in line with UN Security Council resolutions.

The delivery of humanitarian aid from within Syria also continues to be hampered, OCHA said, as aid partners in Damascus “still (have) not been granted the necessary approvals” to reach communities in Quneitra.

The restrictions mean that significant unmet needs continue to increase dramatically, and the situation has been made worse by the fact that many local aid partners have also been forced to flee the fighting, leading to a significant scale-down of some assistance.

“More warehouses are now empty or emptying, which mean that we are very concerned about the continued delivery of lifesaving assistance to those many thousands of affected people,” Laerke said.